

Joe Biden administration toughens asylum restrictions at U.S. border with Mexico

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Washington, October 1 (RHC)-- U.S. President Joe Biden's administration is toughening asylum restrictions at the U.S.-Mexico border, as the Democrat tries to show voters that his party is taking a harder stance on immigration in the lead-up to November's election.

The new rules announced on Monday, which expand on restrictions announced in June, bar migrants from being granted asylum when US officials deem that the southern border is overwhelmed.

“This action has been taken in parallel with other Administration actions that have both increased enforcement and delivered to asylum seekers safe and lawful pathways to humanitarian relief,” Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said in a statement.

Under the previous rules, the US government could restrict asylum access when the number of migrants and asylum seekers trying to enter the country between official border crossings hit 2,500 per day.

The daily numbers had to average below 1,500 per day for a week in order for the restrictions to be lifted. But under the new regulations, which come into effect just after midnight on Tuesday, the daily numbers will have to be below 1,500 for nearly a month before the restrictions can be lifted.

The administration also is now counting all children towards that number, whereas previously only migrant children from Mexico were counted.

The changes will make it much more difficult to lift the curbs and allow people entering the country between official border crossings to apply for asylum in the US — and Monday’s announcement was slammed by migrant rights advocates.

“This policy bolsters xenophobic and racist rhetoric that falsely portrays immigrants as threats. It will also leave a permanent stain on President Biden’s legacy,” said Eleanor Acer, senior director for refugee protection at Human Rights First.

Amy Fischer, director of refugee and migrant rights at Amnesty International USA, accused the administration of “clinging to policies of cruelty when there are solutions on the table.”

“Instead of spending billions of taxpayer dollars to fuel cruel border policies that create heartbreaking human rights and humanitarian crises, the United States must invest in a coordinated welcome and reception system that meets the immediate and long-term needs of people seeking safety,” Fischer said.

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) also slammed the new rules as illegal.

“The asylum law Congress enacted recognizes that people fleeing danger should not be forced to wait and try to secure an appointment to seek asylum. This restrictive rule is not just immoral but illegal,” the group said in a social media post on Monday afternoon.

Under US immigration law, any non-citizens on US soil must be granted due process to seek asylum if they fear for their lives or freedom “on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion”.

Last week, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) also issued new legal guidance for countries on the issue of asylum. Elizabeth Tan, UNHCR’s director of legal protection, noted that Article 31 of the UN Refugee Convention states that countries are barred from penalising asylum seekers for entering the country irregularly in search of protection.

“That article is there because many people flee life-threatening situations and they have no other choice but to take irregular manners of travel, and they often don’t have the opportunity to obtain a travel document or a visa before they’ve fled their country,” Tan told reporters.

Immigration remains a divisive issue in the United States, and it has been used as a way to gain leverage against political opponents. Republicans and right-wing media outlets have routinely accused Democrats of being lax on border security, despite the Biden administration enacting a slew of restrictions such as the asylum curbs.

Republican presidential candidate and former U.S. President Donald Trump – who pursued stringent, anti-immigration measures while in office – continues to hit out at his Democratic rival, U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris, on immigration ahead of November’s election.

Trump and his running mate JD Vance have promised to carry out the largest deportation campaign in US history if elected. They have also amplified and spread false rumours about Haitian migrants, drawing widespread condemnation.

Last week, Harris pledged to continue the Biden administration’s crackdown on irregular crossings at the country’s southern border with Mexico. “The United States is a sovereign nation,” Harris said during a visit to Arizona on Friday. “And I believe we have a duty to set rules at our border and to enforce them.”

The Biden administration has defended its policies as helping to stem a surge in irregular border crossings.

U.S. border authorities have apprehended roughly 54,000 migrants and asylum seekers so far in September, down steeply from a peak of 250,000 in December, a Department of Homeland Security official said.

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